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ABSTRACT

This document describes a National Security Council (NSC) role playing exercise designed to introduce students to the complexities and dynamics of U.S. foreign policy crisis management. Based upon the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) program, "In the Face of Terrorism," this classroom exercise casts students as NSC team members charged with the responsibility of responding to a hypothetical airline hijacking incident. Following a review of the organization and the structure of the activity, its utility as an instructional device is examined. The study is based on the results of a survey of four groups of students who participated in the simulation exercise. (Author/NL)

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Teaching Crisis Management:

A National Security Council Simulation

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Abstract

This paper describes a National Security Council role playing exercise designed to acquaint students with the complexities and dynamics of U.S. foreign policy crisis management. Based upon the Public Broadcasting Service's "In the Face of Terrorism," the exercise casts students as NSC team members charged with the responsibility of responding to a hypothetical airline hijacking incident. Following a review of the organization and structure of the activity, its utility as an instructional device is examined. This assessment is based primarily on the results of a survey of four groups of students who have participated in the simulation.

Teaching Crisis Management:

A National Security Council Simulation

One of the more central tasks confronting instructors of U.S. Foreign Policy courses is familiarizing students with the dynamics of crisis decision making. While an abundance of resources and materials are available for this purpose, it is still difficult to get students to appreciate fully the nature of the constraints and obstacles that tend to undermine efforts to respond appropriately to crisis situations. This paper will discuss one approach that has been utilized to provide students with first-hand experience in dealing with these issues - a National Security Council (NSC) simulation.[1] Following a brief review of the organization and structure of this role playing exercise, its effectiveness as an instructional device will be evaluated. This assessment will be based largely on the results of a survey of four groups of students who have participated in the activity.

The NSC simulation is derived from the Public Broadcasting Service's "In the Face of Terrorism." Produced in cooperation with Georgetown University's Center for Strategic and International Studies, this program constituted a number of former U.S. officials into an NSC crisis team charged with the responsibility of responding to the hijacking of an airliner by a relatively obscure terrorist organization based in the Middle East. Although a bit more threatening than actual situations encountered previously (i.e., with reports of a nuclear device aboard the airliner), the scenario included many elements confronted by U.S. foreign policymakers in past incidents of this nature. With information at a premium, members of the NSC team were given considerable latitude in their efforts to bring about a successful resolution to the crisis.

The simulation, conducted during the last third of the semester, is designed to expose students to both the structural and procedural factors affecting crisis decision making. A highly threatening situation, the hijacking incident is complicated further by the fragmentary and uncertain nature of the intelligence available and the time restraints imposed upon members of the crisis team. Thus, at the very least, the scenario contains many of the more critical elements common to "real life" crisis dramas.

At the same time, the exercise places students in a dynamic group setting where they encounter some of the more significant inter-personal challenges intruding into the decision making process. Representing different perspectives and constituencies, they are faced with the task of accomodating these diverse viewpoints when forging their responses. Given the range of possible reactions to the incident, the likelihood of internal discord is quite high. While required to articulate their positions forcefully and effectively, participants must also strive to preserve the integrity of the group itself by generating consensus for recommendations appropriately suited to the circumstances at hand.

Prior to the actual conduct of the simulation, students are exposed to a considerable amount of material pertaining to crisis decision making and have completed a set of readings focusing exclusively on the development and operation of the National Security Council.[2] To augment this preparation and introduce students to the exercise, a Simulation Handbook is provided at the start of the course. The Handbook includes summary information pertaining to the structure of the National Security Council, the operating procedures governing the simulation, the job descriptions for all members of the crisis team and a series of U.S. Department of State briefs outlining the government's underlying approach and policy orientation relating to

international terrorism. To preserve the element of surprise, the specifics of the situation to be encountered are not revealed. During the intervening weeks, some class time is reserved for reviewing the Handbook materials.

Few other preliminary tasks are required in preparation for the activity. Of course, roles are assigned fairly early so as to enable students to begin thinking about the general issue from their respective positions. The vast majority of participants are upper level political science majors with roughly similar levels of preparation. Roles are distributed on a semi-random basis, with an effort made to cast some of the more verbal and/or academically talented students in primary positions. The actual number of players has varied and it has proven most interesting to include actors who might not necessarily be involved on a sustained basis (e.g., Congressional representatives).

To provide some additional structure, the instructor assumes the Presidency. Nevertheless, every effort is made to restrict the role of the President in shaping the response to the crisis. Formal sessions of the Council are conducted by the Special Assistant for National Security Affairs, with the President confined largely to relating a list of political and security concerns at the outset of the exercise and reacting to the policy recommendations offered along the way. Although poised to challenge the logic of the advice forthcoming, the President maintains a relatively unobstrusive presence and offers only periodic official input.

The simulation is flexible enough to accomodate different numbers of participants. At the very least, the team should include the Vice President, Secretary of State, Secretary of Defense, Special Assistant for National Security Affairs, Director of Central Intelligence, Chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and White House Chief of Staff. Deputy Secretaries of State and

Defense, as well as the U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations and the White House Press Secretary, might also play somewhat pivotal roles. The number of NSC staff specialists can be adjusted to fit space requirements without affecting unduly the outcome. It is suggested that the total membership of the group not exceed twenty students. In this instance, a total of three consecutive hours was allotted to complete the assignment.[3]

The simulation itself is organized into three phases, each lasting approximately one hour, corresponding to the amount and type of information available. The initial segment is designed to give participants the opportunity to assess the general contours of the situation, divide responsibilities and determine the procedures to be adopted in meeting the challenge. The memorandum provided to the NSC Adviser at the start of the session contains broad information concerning the nature of the incident - i.e., the hijacking of a "Trans Med" airliner and its current position at a NATO airbase in Sicily. The four hijackers, who are threatening to destroy the aircraft with the passengers aboard (possibly through the use of a small nuclear device), are believed to be associated with the "Revolutionary National Command." While radio messages to and from the Libyan Embassy in Rome have been reported, the Command has also been linked to Syria and Iran. Finally, team members are notified that U.S. naval and counter-terrorist forçes have been alerted but that no orders have been issued regarding their possible use.

The crisis intensifies significantly during the second phase with the blowing up of the aircraft and the deaths of all aboard. Moreover, a radioactive cloud is reported east of the airfield. The focus now shifts to

identifying those directly responsible. Intelligence reports indicate active Libyan involvement in the direction of the affair. It is also suggested that participation of other countries is likely but as yet unconfirmed.

After allowing time for team members to frame their response, the simulation moves into its final stage. To the dismay of many of the participants, a revised intelligence estimate is issued. Primary responsibility is attached to Syria, which controls the organization involved in training and directing the hijackers. The role of Libya is now seen as secondary in nature. To complicate matters, the Soviet Union - in anticipation of possible U.S. actions against Syria - has placed its strategic forces and command posts on alert. Once again, the team is forced into action.

It is interesting to note the similarities in the reactions of the four teams to the unfolding crisis. During the opening session, students paid particular attention to the need to organize themselves in a productive and efficient fashion. Following an initial meeting of the entire team, working groups were formed along functional lines to consider possible options. With the exception of a brief appearance at the outset to offer instructions for the preparation of a statement to be read at a scheduled "press conference," the President was not involved in these deliberations. As might be expected, energy levels were quite high and participation was extensive, even among those in secondary positions. Students also made a special effort to stay within the boundaries of their assigned roles.

While fully aware of the potential ramifications of the incident, students did not appear particularly concerned with generating an immediate response. Rather, they were preoccupied with the task of acquiring additional information pertaining to the situation at hand. Frustrations over the

absence of sufficient intelligence were evident, but an air of optimism prevailed. The need to coordinate the U.S. response with allies was emphasized and there was interest expressed in legitimizing that response through some form of multilateral framework. Although a somewhat greater sense of urgency was apparent as the session proceeded, students remained quite confident in their ability to resolve the crisis.

The serenity marking the deliberations came to an abrupt end with the announcement regarding the destruction of the aircraft and the release of the radioactive cloud. It was during this second phase of the exercise that a crisis mentality took root. The initial reaction was one of betrayal - students did not expect the situation to deteriorate so rapidly. This unanticipated turn of events took its toll on the groups themselves, as tensions (of both an inter-personal and institutional nature) began to surface. Arguments pertaining to the appropriate mix of diplomatic and military responses were especially pronounced. Attention also focused on limiting the political fallout affecting the President, who was a bit more active at this point in prodding Council members. Team dynamics also shifted to some degree, as the stronger personalities (in most cases, those occupying primary roles) began to dominate the proceedings.

Despite the conditional nature of the communique regarding Libyan complicity, students had little difficulty accepting Libyan guilt and responsibility or proposing extreme retaliatory measures. Libya's previous track record was deemed sufficient to give credence to the intelligence report. The policy packages offered were quite comprehensive and included any number of bilateral and multilateral diplomatic and economic initiatives. In three of the four participating groups, military actions were also incorporated. At the center of these proposals was the recommendation to

initiate a series of air strikes targeted at terrorist training camps in Libya. In one instance, moreover, contingency plans were developed for a coup against the Libyan regime. Concern over the reliability of the intelligence prompted only one of the teams to restrict its military response to a naval show of force along the Libyan coast.

The satisfaction with their ability to react decisively to these events was quite evident among all of the groups involved. Yet, this sense of relief proved short lived as they soon found themselves faced with more complex challenges (i.e., Syrian complicity and the Soviet threat) during the final phase of the exercise. The virtual absence of remorse regarding previous steps taken against Libya was intriguing. Moreover, consensus was reached on the need to move forward with additional justification of those actions without public acknowledgement of the revised intelligence estimate. Given the history of relations with Libya, this was seen as a relatively safe strategy for protecting the political position of the President.

With regard to the new set of circumstances confronted, however, a far more cautious approach was adopted. In every case, the crisis was ultimately defused without resorting to military measures against Syria. Still, the resolution did not come easily. Tensions were evident within all the groups, as students had less tolerance for some of their colleagues and often became less willing to hear perspectives contrary to their own. This was especially true with regard to discussions over the seriousness and credibility of the Soviet threat. Yet, in the end, the threat was deemed significant enough to avoid a direct confrontation. To be sure, Syria was subject to an array of diplomatic and economic sanctions. Nevertheless, with the spectre of Soviet involvement looming large, the need to maintain open lines of communications with the Soviets was emphasized and all recommendations designed to punish

Syria were predicated on the need to prevent a further escalation of tensions. While most students appeared angered by these constraints, they felt that no other alternative was acceptable.

There is also evidence to suggest that, through their activities, students did come to appreciate many of the key forces shaping the crisis decision making process. Their assessments of the significance of those elements impacting upon the deliberations were most instructive (TABLE 1). To begin with, participants appeared to have little difficulty differentiating among the structural and procedural factors affecting their ability to react decisively. As expected, those items pertaining directly to the dimensions of the crisis itself were among the most salient influences on the decisions of the respective teams. In their efforts to resolve the issue, students saw the absence of sufficient and reliable information, the high degree of threat and the shortness of time as the most critical constraints.

Although of lesser import, group dynamics were also found to influence their responses. This was reflected in the importance attached to the difficulties of balancing conflicting perspectives and managing interpersonal relationships. At the same time, there was little indication that the structure of the simulation itself affected the eventual outcome. Neither fatigue nor boredom was seen as particularly relevant to the overall process.

For the most part, the roles assumed by students in the exercise had little bearing on their evaluations of these influences. The ratings of those occupying the more central positions -- the NSC Adviser, Secretary of State, Secretary of Defense, Director of Central Intelligence, Chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, White House Chief of Staff -- corresponded closely to those in secondary posts. In both instances, coping with the challenges dictated by the situation at hand weighed most heavily on the decisions. Still, those

with less formal responsibility tended to view interpersonal relationships and fatigue of somewhat greater relative importance. Owing largely to their lack of authority and the need to stay within the confines of their roles, these students were forced to expend considerable energy and encountered some frustration as they sought to assert themselves during the course of the deliberations. Thus, it was understandable that they were a bit more sensitive to the constraints imposed by the environment in which they operated.

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Given the similarities in the procedures adopted and the outcomes generated by the four groups participating in the exercise, the absence of any significant differences in the response sets was not surprising (TABLE 2). Yet, some distinctions were apparent. For members of group two, for example, interpersonal relationships ranked higher than the need to accomodate divergent perspectives in terms of their overall impact. The somewhat more contentious atmosphere evident throughout the course of the fourth exercise was also reflected in the reactions of members of that team. For them, the difficulties of balancing conflicting views were seen as an even greater challenge than responding within the allotted time. Moreover, unlike their counterparts, they found their decisions affected more by the threat of events than the flow of information. Yet, these minor variations can be traced largely to the particulars of the respective exercises. They do not suggest any truly significant differences in the lessons derived by participants in the four cases.

TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

As noted earlier, most of the students seemed to enjoy the experience and were generally quite pleased with their ability to execute the tasks at hand (TABLE 3). Although viewed in a slightly more favorable light during the "heat of battle," the procedures adopted were deemed, for the most part, as both appropriate and effective. Struggles for control - particularly between those representing the Department of State and the Department of Defense - surfaced periodically during each of the exercises. Nevertheless, satisfaction was also evident with respect to the actual decisions reached, individual performances and the overall effectiveness of the simulation itself. The more favorable impressions of the primary actors were not surprising, given their greater stake and responsibility in affecting the outcome.[4]

TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

The NSC simulation has been a valuable addition to the U.S. Foreign Policy course curriculum. It has provided students a means for becoming more directly involved in the learning process. The active involvement of a number of students who have not otherwise participated regularly in classroom discussions has also been a pleasant surprise.

The debriefing sessions, conducted during the next scheduled class meeting, have proven especially lively. Students have relished the opportunity to rehash their experiences and have been most forthcoming in their critiques of individual and group performances. More importantly, their responses to questions relating to the substance of the exercise suggest a greater appreciation for the complexities of crisis management. Through a viewing of a videotape of the PBS program, moreover, they have been able to contrast their successes and failures with those of the professionals. The

lessons are driven home a bit more forcefully when they come to realize that the outcomes were rather similar.

When planning for role playing exercises such as this, special effort must be made to insure appropriate balance. They should not be undertaken at the expense of the coverage of other core concepts or materials, nor should they assume disproportionate importance. With the proper preparation and the inclusion of sufficient outlets for reflection and evaluation, however, they can serve as useful catalysts in providing students the perspectives necessary for a more thorough understanding of the American foreign policy process.

Notes

[1] See Douglas W. Simon, "Simulation: The National Security Council," News for Teachers of Political Science, No. 47, Fall 1985, pp. 3-4, for a discussion of an alternative strategy for integrating such an exercise into the curriculum.

[2] A particularly good source is Decisions of the Highest Order: Perspectives on the National Security Council, edited by Karl F. Inderfurth and Loch K. Johnson (Brooks/Cole Publishing Company, 1988).

[3] The target course is offered as an upper division seminar meeting once a week for three hours. This has proven particularly useful in insuring the continuity of the exercise.

[4] No significant differences were detected with respect to the assessments of the four teams. It is interesting to note that the reactions of group three - which did not recommend military retaliation against Libya - were basicaaly in line with those of the others. One might have expected these students to see their accomplishments in more favorable terms, in light of the revised intelligence estimate pertaining to Libyan complicity.

TABLE 1: DECISION FACTORS: RELATIVE IMPORTANCE (MEANS)

	Total	Primary Actors	Secondary Actors
Information	1.34	1.38	1.32
Threat	1.36	1.29	1.40
Time	1.87	1.79	1.92
Conflicting Perspectives	2.10	2.25	2.00
Interpersonal Relationships	2.39	2.63	2.24 *
Fatigue	3.26	3.54	3.08 **
Boredom	3.77	3.88	3.71
	(n=62)	(n=24)	(n=38)

1=Very Important
4=Not Important

* sig. <.10
** sig. <.05

TABLE 2: RELATIVE IMPORTANCE/GROUPS (MEANS)

	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4
Information	1.47	1.32	1.25	1.25
Threat	1.21	1.53	1.33	1.33
Time	1.90	1.79	1.83	2.00
Conflicting Perspectives	2.16	2.32	1.83	1.92
Interpersonal Relationships	2.58	2.00	2.25	2.83
Fatigue	3.05	3.37	3.17	3.50
Boredom	3.79	3.79	3.58	3.92
	(n=19)	(n=19)	(n=12)	(n=12)

1=Very Important
4=Not Important

TABLE 3: ASSESSMENTS (MEANS)

	Total	Primary Actors	Secondary Actors
Procedures			
In Progress	2.32	2.42	2.26
Post-Game	2.42	2.33	2.47
Decisions			
In Progress	2.32	2.04	2.50 **
Post-Game	2.55	2.38	2.66
Individual Performance	2.61	2.33	2.79 *
Simulation Effectiveness	1.47	1.29	1.58 *
	(n=62)	(n=24)	(n=38)

1=Very Effective
4=Not Effective

* sig. <.10
** sig. <.05